Eighteen Minutes

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After an ambush, Casey is given until the end of a radio program to perform a theft for the Purple Dragons before Raphael is murdered. Rated for language and violence.

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Eighteen Minutes

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Before the Clock

Author's Notes: Heed the warning for language. I don't use it myself, but frankly, there's no way to get around it when the story involves Casey, Raph, and gangsters.

12:36 AM

Casey watched as his best friend jumped off a building. He jogged to the edge and watched as his best friend flew silently down to the street below. He watched as his best friend caught the edge of a fire escape ten feet above the ground. The fire escape rattled, but only slightly.

The miracle of ninjitsu.

Casey peered down to the street below. No one was there. Why was Raph trying to be so quiet? "Hey Raph," he called down, "I think we can skip the action hero moves. They got away."

Raphael glared up at him from below. "Shut up, ya big freak," he hissed. "Now if anyone's hidin' down there, they'll know we're comin'." That was an oddity about Raph. He had spent his entire life below the ground, in the sewers, avoiding all contact with human life, with the rest of his family—three brothers and a father. All mutants. All turtles, except for his dad, who was a rat. And Japanese. But somehow, Raph had managed to pick up a Bronx accent. Maybe it had been a deliberate choice to separate himself from the rest of his family. That wouldn't surprise Casey. Raph always played the martyr when it came to his family. Eh, he was young. He would learn.

Heat spread over Casey's face like wildfire. He and Raph shared many traits. They were both hot-tempered, for example. They were reckless, gung-ho, and prone to violent rage. They both had a fierce sense of justice and a fiercer sense of right and wrong. Neither

would back down from a fight if there was any alternative. However, Casey did give Raph credit for being the only one between them who knew when to shut up.

"Okay," Casey whispered down to him, leaning over the edge of the building and nearly losing his balance. He wobbled. "So how do you expect me to get down there?" They had been chasing after a report they'd heard from Raph's police monitor: a minor theft in the vicinity, no units available. The night had been slow so far—after watching Casey's favorite violent movie, they had gone out together to "bust a few heads." The theft was the only lead they'd had in about two hours, and it was something they could easily abandon if something more important came up.

"Use the stairs, dumbass," Raph hissed up at his friend, eyes narrow, but the slight smile on his face indicating that this cluelessness was something he actually found endearing about Casey—it meant that he wasn't the stupidest person around, something Casey knew Raph felt too often. "Quietly!"

Casey gave his friend a half-smile and jumped down to the fire escape. He knew not to take anything Raph said personally. Some people, including Raph's own family, thought Raph was hard to read. Casey didn't need to read Raph. All Casey had to do was imagine how he himself would be feeling in the same situation, and Raph would be feeling the same way. While an insult from Raph could be made sharp enough to cut, it could just as easily be as blunt as a friendly punch on the arm.

Raph released his hold on the fire escape and landed softly on his feet on the ground. That was another thing that blew Casey's mind—that Raph and his brothers could fall from heights like that and not get hurt. They spent their lives learning how not to get hurt, he supposed. They were ninjas. *My best friend is a ninja turtle* . The thought of saying that to someone made Casey grin as he clambered down the fire escape as quietly as possible. Below him, Raph sniffed out the alley. Dark. No lights. Casey had no idea what he would find down there.

"Shut up," Raph breathed, waving his hand in the general direction of his human friend.

Casey stopped, two-thirds of the way down, looking down from the railing. "What?"

"You hear somethin'?"

Straining his ears, Casey could hear nothing. "Nada, my friend. Just cars an' stuff."

"Somethin' breathin'."

"That would be you an' me, pal," Casey said as he continued down the stairs.

"No, like a fat guy. They always breathe different. Somethin' to do with the airway bein' blocked." He stopped and listened again.

"I don't hear nothin'."

"I told ya to be quiet."

"I'm bein' quiet, Raph." Casey flipped over the railing and jumped the rest of the way down, about six feet. He landed hard and nearly fell to his knees. "Shhhi...crap," he censored himself halfway through.

Raph glanced back at him. "April makin' ya stop cussin' again?"

"Yeah," Casey admitted, ambling over toward his friend.

"You shouldn't let her."

"Nah, I don't mind. 'Sides, it's probably a bad habit. There are a lot worse things I could give up, 'specially considering who I'm givin' it up for." Casey couldn't keep a grin from spreading across his face.

"I'll give ya that, Case," Raph said, turning back to the alley and scanning the area. "She's somethin'." His eyes fell and studied the

ground.

Although he and Raph told each other everything except that which they told no one, Casey was usually reluctant to talk with Raph about his girlfriend for fear of making him uncomfortable. Unlike Casey, Raph didn't have a female of his kind, and was therefore doomed to be a bystander in romance. Unless Casey could find a really, really kinky girl. Maybe Raph liked them kinky. Heck, would Raph even know what he liked? "Sorry, Raph."

Raph's eyes snapped up to him. "What, did a monkey perform your lobotomy? That had nothin' to do with you. There's somethin' on the ground. C'mere."

Casey walked over and squinted at the area to which Raph was pointing. "Looks like some kinda receipt."

"Dry. It was rainin' ten minutes ago. This's new."

"You're right. What's it say?"

Raph knelt to pick it up. "I don't know. Let's--"

A gunshot sounded. Raph swore and jumped to his feet. Casey leaped backward, yanking his hockey stick and baseball bat from the harness on his back. Twin sais appeared in Raph's hands, at the ready. Two men, previously hiding around the corner of a building, appeared from the shadows. They had guns.

"Casey," Raph said in a warning tone. Casey glanced behind to see three more men stepping from the shadows. They had guns, too. Casey whirled to face them, pressing his back to Raph's. Five men with guns. Alone, Casey wouldn't stand a chance. But he had a ninja on his side, and that had to be worth at least four of them.

One man, a black man of average height, slit-eyed and wearing a t-shirt with a beer ad, stepped forward with a grin that made his stark

white teeth stand out. "We gotcha, Jones," he said in a deep bass voice.

Jones? Holy crap. "How do you know who I am?" demanded Casey, gritting his teeth.

Unless they were...

"Purple Dragons?" Raph grunted from behind Casey. Casey could feel the vibrations of his friend's voice through his back.

"Oh, listen ta that," rumbled the man, who seemed to be the leader. "The freak's smarter than Jones." He raised his gun and pointed it at Casey. "Now put down the stick. We needa talk."

Casey growled and launched himself at the man, bringing his hockey stick down onto his right hand. The man swore and dropped the gun. The gangster behind him, an enormous, pale man with a shaved head— *breathing like a fat guy* , Casey remembered Raph saying— stepped forward as the leader was disarmed, pressing the end of his gun to Casey's forehead before Casey knew what he was doing. Behind him, Casey heard the sounds of flesh striking flesh—Raph was putting up a fight, he realized, causing a leap of joy in his chest. The man holding Casey at gunpoint sneered at him and forced him backwards, snarling for him to drop his weapons. Casey obliged, confident that Raph would pull through.

Until he heard the fighting cease for half a second, followed by a gunshot.

The shot pounded into Casey's brain like a physical thing, its echoes striking his head again and again. The cry immediately following it was just as painful—it was Raph's voice. Heedless of the gun pointed at him, Casey whirled around with a cry and fell forward a few steps toward his friend, who had crumpled to the ground and was now sitting half-reclined, face distorted with pain.

"Raph!" he gasped before he felt the end of his captor's gun butt against the back of his head, whispering against his hair.

"You move, you die," hissed the gangster.

Standing close to Raph was another man, tall and menacing, posing with his gun resting at his shoulder like he was on a movie poster. His hair was dark and yanked back into short ponytail, his complexion slightly tan but butter-smooth, and his eyes as grey as limestone. His black shirt had a red skull on it, and the sleeves were ripped off, revealing well-muscled arms. Ragged jeans tumbled down to worn brown shoes. He was no kid, but he couldn't have been older than thirty. He might have been Casey's age, actually.

"Shit," hissed a voice behind Casey, and the leader of the gangsters dashed in front of him. He stopped a few feet in front of Casey and shouted at the man who had shot Raph. "You shot the damn ninja!"

"He was getting on my nerves," sneered the other, grey eyes half-lidded. Casey was uncomfortably reminded of Raph, but Raph would never try to kill someone just for getting on his nerves.

"He's the one we're here for," snapped the leader, tagging on a word April didn't let Casey use.

"So we get Jones to do it," the other man slurred lazily.

Casey tensed. He didn't like this conversation.

"Thanks to you, we have to. But if this don't work, the boss it gonna take it out on no one but Enzo Gordon." The name apparently referred to the gangster being addressed. "Now keep your gun on the freak an' don't shoot him again." While Casey couldn't see the leader's face, he was sure it wasn't pleasant. He turned suddenly, glaring daggers at Casey, who returned the stare. The man swaggered toward the vigilante, regaining control of himself with each step, until a confidant smirk was all that remained on his face when he reached his prey.

Casey ventured a glance at Raph. The turtle had pulled himself to one knee, but he was bent painfully over his right thigh, which was blossoming dark wetness that glinted from the distant street light. His eyes turned to the leader of the gangsters, who was fully as tall as himself. The leader stared back, still smirking. After a moment of silence, he spoke.

"You've been annoying us again, Jones," he said in a sing-song manner. Casey spat in his face. The man's eyes narrowed, then he grinned and wiped the spittle from his face with the sleeve of his hoodie. "We've been real patient with you, Jones, but things change. We all know you're still upset about your dear ol' daddy an' want your revenge, but tonight's the night you learn some respect."

Casey snorted. "Yeah," he snarled sarcastically. This was the gang responsible for his father's death and his family's ruin. The Purple Dragons had been his greatest source of fear as a child before and after the fire that broke his family, leaving his mother a widow and himself fatherless. The fear had fed his anger until there was no fear left, just a burning anger and a desire to keep what happened to him from happening again, to him or anyone else.

"Shut up, Casey," Raph unexpectedly growled from the pavement, receiving a kick in the side from the gangster covering him that made him flinch. He was right, Casey realized. Too much talk was going to get them both killed.

The leader leaned in, his horrible breath filling Casey's nostrils. "Listen up real close, Jones. Down the road is St. Claire's Hospital. A woman just came in dead from a little accident. Her name was Cheryl Mattingly. She was an organ donor, and her kidneys is sittin' in there in jars."

His eyes narrowed suddenly at Casey. The subject changed. "My favorite radio program is on, an' I'm missin' it 'cause a' you." He tilted his head to one side and called, "Turn on the radio, Jezimar."

A slim, dark gangster, who had had held back during the fight, sauntered forward and set a small radio on the ground, turning it on. It crackled as he changed the frequency, then a voice emerged.

"...tell ya kids today expect too much out of their technology. I remember video games back when the soundtrack had one instrument, and you could ask freakin' Beethoven whether it was an oboe or a violin an' he'd be like 'WHAT THE FUCK?.'"

Laughter crackled from the radio. The leader chuckled as the comedian continued. "See, this guy cracks me up, an' I'm missin' him." His face lost all trace of amusement, and his eyes glittered hostilely. "Tell ya what, Jones. I listen to my show while you run a errand for me."

"Fuck you," hissed Casey. Forget his promise to April, it needed to be said.

"Not so fast, Jones. The show ends at one a.m. While I listen, you go get me Cheryl Mattingly's kidney. You come back before the show ends, you give us the kidney, you an' your little green friend go on your merry way."

He pulled another gun and held it level with his other. "If, by chance, the show ends, and you ain't here with the kidney, you'll find him in a lesser state than you left him." He spun the second gun like a dueler in an old Western movie. His inimical gaze turned toward Raph. "It's empty," he told the turtle with a grin. Raph only glared back at him, his penetrating dark eyes as sharp and deadly as his sai. The gangster continued to address Raph. "If my show ends before Mr. Jones here gets back, you're gonna bring it here to me, an' I'll load it. See," he hoisted the gun he had handled first, "this is the gun I shoot you with if you ain't cooperatin'." He dropped it to his side and raised the other gun with a gleeful smirk. "THIS is the gun I shoot you with if your friend ain't here in time." He tossed the empty gun to Raph, who shied from it. It landed on the pavement in front of him and skidded toward the turtle.

Raph looked at it, then up at the gangster. "No thanks," he hissed.

"Pick it up," the one called Enzo snarled, giving Raph's wounded leg a fierce kick. Raph released something between a growl and a scream through his clenched teeth, curling over his wounded leg instinctively.

"You heard him," sneered the leader. "Pick it up."

If Raph didn't pick up the gun, he might be killed. It took Casey's breath away to encourage his friend to cooperate with the thugs, but Raph wouldn't listen to the gangsters. "Do it, Raph," he said, flicking his chin upward in a show of confidence. *I won't let them use it* .

Raph's eyes snapped up, widening fractionally, then narrowing at his best friend. He picked up the gun without looking. It had the same effect as giving everyone in the vicinity the finger.

"If you call the cops," continued the leader, turning back to Casey with a gleam in his eye, "they'll find your little friend here, too, an' he'll be dead. Wouldn't that be tragic?" he tagged on musically, punctuating it with a confident grin.

"You bastard!" Casey growled, taking a hasty step in the leader's direction. It had been bad enough that these goons had ambushed them, but now that they just might have to cooperate, Casey's blood was beginning to boil.

There was the sound of a gun being cocked. Casey's eyes swerved to the motion he had caught out of the corner of his eye--Enzo lifting the gun to aim at Raph's head. "Jones," warned the leader, "I ain't playin' no games here. You want your friend to live, you do what I say." When Casey didn't reply, the leader cocked a half-smile. "Jimmy, give 'im the radio."

The gangster addressed, a man with dirty blond hair, brown eyes, and a tattoo of a snake winding around his meaty arm stepped forward, holding a minuscule portable radio with tiny ear buds

attached. He was unwinding the headphones as he walked toward Casey.

"Turn the radio to 52.9 FM an' you'll be able to listen along with us," the leader informed him with more than a little glee as Jimmy handed Casey the radio, which the vigilante took without a word. "When Mitch goes off, so does the gun." The leader made a clicking sound against the insides of his cheeks with his tongue.

Casey stared at the radio in his hands, then glanced up darkly, fists clenching around the device. They were toying with him. They could have simply told him that he had until the top of the hour, but no, they had to do this radio crap and make Raph bring them the gun that would end his life. That ticked him off. "What if I think you should stick your damn radio up your damn ass?" he said hotly, realizing too late that he was toying with his life, as well as Raph's.

The leader did not physically react to Casey's words. "This ain't up for negotiation, Jones. You got nineteen minutes until Mitch O'Farrell and your friend both go off the air."

Casey froze. Nineteen minutes? "Are you fucking kidding me?" That was ridiculous! He would never get the kidney in time--

The leader glanced at his watch. "Yup," he said with poisonous sweetness. "You got eighteen minutes now." He looked at Casey, eyes hard and uncompromising.

It hurt. Turning his brain around, actually realizing that he was going to have to accept the gang's terms was painful. But he had run out of time to think, to talk his way out of this one. No time to get used to it. No time to accept it. With an animal growl, Casey turned and ran. Behind him, he heard the uproarious laughter of the five ruthless gangsters he was leaving behind with his closest friend in the world. Casey ran, and could feel the bond that connected his senses to Raph snap, leaving them both alone.

Author's Notes: Please review. I love constructive criticism. Flames will meet asbestos suit.

12:42 AM

Author's Notes: From here on, the chapters will be a bit shorter due to the limited amount of time in which the story takes place, covering only a few minutes of time per chapter.

12:42 AM

Casey flew down the street, forcing even breaths between each footfall. The hospital was a block and a half from the alley, and he had absolutely no time to waste. Breathe in, breathe out. Cars whizzed by, their headlights like slow-moving comets in the black void of the street. Black street. Nothing's ever dark in New York. Lights everywhere. But the street is black. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. His footfalls pounded through his head. No time to waste. The pulse of his breath became white noise in his deafening ears. Breathe in, breathe out. No time to waste.

He was at the hospital, in front of the emergency room doors. What was he supposed to do again? The kidney, right! Cheryl Mattingly. How the heck was he going to get a kidney? They had to be keeping it somewhere. Somewhere where they keep organs. Maybe some freezer or something. He had to find out. How the heck was he going to find out? Why the heck did they want a kidney? He pushed that last question aside. It wasn't important. It wasn't something he needed to figure out in order to save Raph. Where was he? That's right, finding where they keep organs. He could ask. They'd ask him why he wanted to know. He'd lie. How would he get to the room with the organs without getting caught? He could bust his way in. He doubted it. He'd dropped his sticks back in the alley. No wonder they'd wanted Raph to do this. Don't think about that. No time. Um, what could he do? He could use his cell and call the other turtles! Wash of relief. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Because his cell was sitting on his coffee table at home. *FUCK!* he screamed at himself silently, punching the air with both fists. Stupid, stupid. Now

what? Think. Think. He could dress up. Go in, get the kidney, get out. That would work.

"The other day I went to a Civil War reenactment," Mitch O'Farrell's voice buzzed through the earbuds in Casey's ears. "And I heard a bunch of kids, this class of elementary school kids, asking all these questions. 'Is that a real goat? Is that a real fire? Can I touch it?'" Laughter. "So I went up to them and I started asking them questions like, 'Is that chewing gum real? Can I touch it?'" More laughter.

Casey glanced at his watch. Holy crap, he had already lost two minutes. That only left him sixteen more. He couldn't waste any more time thinking. He ran through the doors to the E.R. and found himself in some foyer or something, a small room that turned into a hallway veering off to the right, with a door in front of him and another to the left. The latter was open, leading into the waiting room.

Scrubs. He had to find scrubs. Where did they keep scrubs? How was he going to get scrubs? He took a deep breath to clear his head. There was no sense in drawing attention to himself by looking distraught. Raph would be fine. Casey wouldn't let anything happen to him. Wasn't that what his ma had told him when he was a kid, and terrified that the Purple Dragons were going to come after them? Ma had calmly said that she wasn't worried, because she wasn't going to let anything happen to her boy. And she hadn't. Casey had made it out all right. It was his dad who had died.

And he was stealing a freakin' kidney for his father's murderers.

Don't think about that. No time.

No one was around. This wasn't the biggest hospital in New York, and even if it was, every night wasn't an episode of *ER* , so the only people he saw were sitting quietly in the waiting room, reading magazines or managing restless kids. No, wait—he saw a nurse walk through the door in front of him without looking at him. As the door opened and closed, he caught a glimpse of a couple of machines that he couldn't identify and a chair. Instinctively, he

followed her. Raph had always told him that his instincts were what he should follow since his head wasn't any good. It was a real Raph kind of thing to say. He smirked, opened the door, and slipped through.

He was in some sort of prep room, with stools and padded chairs and the things they took your blood pressure with, dark against the glaring white walls. The nurse he'd followed had gone into another room—the door on the opposite wall was still swinging shut. And over against the left wall—ch-ching! A rack of scrubs. Glancing around to make sure no one else was there, Casey scrambled over to the rack and grabbed the largest set of scrubs he saw. No time to waste. He yanked them on over his clothes. On a shelf nearby, not too far from the scrubs, beside a cardboard box full of rubber gloves, was a box of those masks they used to keep from breathing germs. Perfect. He seized one and fitted it over his mouth and nose. It didn't have the security of the full coverage of his hockey mask, but it was all he had to work with, and definitely better than nothing.

Then, sucking in a deep breath and forcing himself to slow down, Dr. Jones slipped back out the door.

After Casey ran off, the supposed leader of the gangsters turned back to Raph with a sneer. "Welcome to the party, freak." He stepped forward and kicked Raph in the face. Pain exploded in Raph's teeth and spread throughout his whole head, pulsing hotly from his mouth. The man bent over, grabbed Raph's chin, and yanked him forward until their faces were close. "You an' your freak friends been givin' us shit for a while. Whaddya say ta that?"

The man should have known better than to ask. "You're fuckin' welcome." Raph curled his stinging mouth into as much of a grin as he could manage.

The man released Raph's chin and backhanded him, causing the turtle's head to snap to one side. Raph had the feeling that the gangster would have done so regardless of what he had said and

had posed the question as an excuse to do so. "You'll learn real quick ta keep your mouth shut, ya little fucker," the man said sharply.

Raph shrugged. "You asked," he said, knowing it would earn him another strike. It did. Raph tasted blood.

"You think you're smart, huh?" The man grabbed the dangling straps of Raph's eye mask and yanked, painfully jerking the turtle's head back. Raph stared straight up at the sky, keeping his face as even as possible, although his muscles tensed in response to the treatment. "I'll tell ya what. You got four Purple Dragons here with guns, an' they all hate you. Now, I might keep control over alla them until your friend gets back, but I ain't guaranteein' nothin'. Try thinkin' your way outta that one, punk." He released the straps of Raph's mask and stood up, fluidly walking away towards where the radio sat on the damp pavement.

Raph was silent, glaring at the man chuckling at the radio show. The pain throbbing in his face and, far more, his leg, was beginning to wear at him. He couldn't let that show. He couldn't let any weakness show. Not the pain, not the chilling fear vibrating in his bones. Anger. Anger, he could show. Anger fueled by the fear and pain. Anger that these men were holding him prisoner. Anger that they had ambushed them in the first place. Anger that he had been shot. Anger at that *stupid* comedian on that *stupid* radio show!

"The other day I went to a Civil War reenactment," buzzed the voice from the radio. "And I heard a bunch of kids, this class of elementary school kids, asking all these questions. 'Is that a real goat? Is that a real fire? Can I touch it?'" The laugh track sounded. "So I went up to them and I started asking them questions like, 'Is that chewing gum real? Can I touch it?'" The laugh track again. Raph hated this guy, hated this retard who thought he was so funny, so freakin' funny.

He hated waiting to die. *Dammit, why couldn't Casey have let 'em shoot me and get it the hell over with? They're just gonna kill us both when he comes back.*

He hated being surprised. Not that he had been *completely* caught off guard by the ambush, but if that idiot Casey had just shut his trap, Raph would have been able to hear them coming, and they wouldn't be in this mess.

Most of all, he hated the gangsters who thought they were all that, just for shooting a guy in the leg and blackmailing another into stealing a kidney. Bullies. Cowards. He shoved the empty gun he had been given into his belt and snorted to himself. What did they need a kidney for, anyway?

"Whaddyou you need a kidney for?" he muttered, his voice croaking slightly. He cleared his throat. *Dammit, Raphael, now they'll know they got you worked up.*

The one with the gun on him, Enzo, kicked him from behind, not hard enough to knock him over, but hard enough to cause a lance of pain to spike from his shell to his spine. Raph clenched his jaw, refusing to let the pain show on his face. He could handle pain, he told himself.

"The Purple Dragons are a dyin' breed," said Enzo. "We got you lowlifes to thank for that. Boss's kidneys're runnin' on fumes. He goes into the hospital, he's in the slammer soon as he gets out. This way, we're guaranteed we get the kidney quick an' no one gets arrested."

Raph snorted. "Better go back to med school, Dr. Quinn. You can't just grab some kidney--" An epiphany struck him before he completed the sentence. They didn't want just any kidney. They had asked for a specific one. They had known her name, which hospital she'd gone to, and that she'd died not long ago.

They had arranged for the murder of a specific donor.

"You bastards," he growled, heat flaring up in his gut. He supposed they had caused the theft that had drawn him and Casey to that alley in the first place. In response to his utterance, Enzo scowled and

clubbed him across the face with his gun. Pain on pain exploded over Raph's face. Man, this guy would take any excuse.

"We arranged for a little accident to happen to the boss's sister," the leader said, sauntering into Raph's field of vision again, having wandered away to listen to the radio. "She's 'is blood type an' everything. We busted into a pharmacy for drugs. Even kidnapped some surgeon from South Africa who was 'ere on vacation. All we need's the kidney, an' we're in the clear."

"You didn't have to tell him about the surgeon, Malcolm," the big guy with the shaved head said warningly. "Now he'll have something else to tell the cops."

Malcolm laughed. "This guy ain't tellin' no one nothin'. Ain't ya noticed yet? He's a big fuckin' turtle."

"He'll tell Jones."

"Yeah, House, 'cause we're not gonna kill 'em, right?" Malcolm was obviously being sarcastic. "I told him, I ain't gonna guarantee he'll live."

Enzo growled. "Then I say we go ahead and kill 'im. No point riskin' 'im gettin' away from us."

Malcolm turned lazily. "Patience, my friend. Let's see how Jones does. Let's also see if our little freak here gets outta hand. We might want to reward him for good behavior. Ain't no point makin' a good hostage go to waste. 'T's what Jake always used ta say."

Raph bristled at the word "hostage." He did not like that word. Hostages were helpless innocents in the wrong place at the wrong time. Raph was neither helpless nor innocent. He rescued hostages. He didn't become one of them.

Granted, that was before five thugs with guns shot him in the leg. A life of training in the art of ninjitsu by the pupil of one of the world's

greatest ninjas, and that was what brought him down. Thugs with guns. He liked that even less than being a hostage.

"It wouldn't be a waste." Enzo's eyes were positively glowing, as though he were imagining the many ways in which he could kill their captive.

"Like I said, patience," Malcolm said calmly, a half-smile cut into his face. "You'll watch 'im die."

Raph didn't like that half-smile, either.

From the radio came Mitch O'Farrell's voice. "Let me tell you about my mom..."

Casey had better make tracks. And he'd better not have forgotten his cell.

12:45 AM

12:45 AM

"Let me tell you about my mom," said Mitch O'Farrell through a pair of black earbuds.

Casey knocked on the glass of the reception desk of the emergency room. A young woman glanced up at him. Her blond hair was tied back in an attractive messy style. Eyes a striking shade of grey peered at him through spotless rectangular glasses. Something about her made him think of April. Her I.D. card, pinned onto her left shoulder, read the name Andrea Gibbs. Heh. She even had an A-name.

She slid the glass to one side. "Can I help you?"

Casey yanked the sliding scrubs pants up onto his bony hips. "Yeh...y'know the Mattingly lady just died here? Where'd they put her organs?" His voice sounded so weird, muffled by the mask he was wearing. It didn't sound anything like the hard echo from his hockey mask.

Andrea blinked at him through her glasses. "She died just a few hours ago. They're probably still in the morgue, on ice."

"Right. Where's the morgue?" Andrea gazed at him suspiciously. "I'm new," he offered sheepishly.

"Where's your name tag?" she asked softly, eyes narrowing fractionally.

Casey blinked. Name tag? Ohhhhh crap.

Andrea took a deep breath and stood up, lifting her phone from its receiver. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave, sir." She began to dial a number on the phone.

Crap. He hadn't thought he'd blow his cover this early. *Looks like we're doing this Casey Jones style after all.* Lashing forward, he knocked the phone from her hand and grabbed her by the back of her neck, pulling her forward. Close up, she reminded him even more of April, and he was so startled that he almost released her. He kept his grip firm enough to scare, but not firm enough to choke. "Tell me where the morgue is," he hissed, his breath rebounding off her face back to tingle against his.

Her eyes were enormous, her terror almost palpable. "Second basement," she gasped. He released her and dashed for a nearby elevator, ignoring the pointed stares of the people in the waiting room. He hit the down button. And waited. And waited. And hit the down button urgently twice more. He glanced back to see Andrea making a hasty phone call. The police would be here. "Fuck this," he muttered and dashed for the stairs.

Down he went, clambering down the stairs as fast as he could without tripping and falling, skipping sets of three steps. Down, down, down, how far down was the second basement? The floors were marked. He was at B. That would be basement one. The next floor down, then. Down, down, down.

He hadn't liked scaring the girl. He didn't like scaring girls at all, especially not ones that reminded him of April. He wished April were here, with her wide green eyes, her Nicole Kidman lips, her fragrant hair. Her hair smelled so good. Whatever shampoo or conditioner or whatever she used drove him crazy. It was weird, but he wanted to smell her hair right now. That would be comforting. That would make it not so bad that he was looking for basement two with a bunch of psychos back there in an alley with his best friend.

The sign by the door on the next floor read "BB." He burst through the door and into a corridor painted a sterile white. Morgue. He had to find the morgue. Mitch was in the middle of some stupid parody song he'd written, the Weird Al wannabe, and it was distracting. *Shut up, Mitch.* He had to find the morgue. What was the morgue? The room with all the bodies stored in those freaky refrigerated drawers.

He'd seen enough cop shows to know that. No, couldn't call the cops. Those thugs would kill Raph. He couldn't let that happen.

He sprinted down the corridor, reading signs by doors as he went. Not morgue. Not morgue. Not morgue. Everything that didn't read "morgue" wasn't important enough for his brain to process. Left, right, left, right he looked at each door. Not morgue, not morgue, not morgue, MORGUE!

Without a thought, he exploded through the door to the morgue and found himself face to face with a terrified mortician wielding a scalpel.

Jimmy sang along with Mitch O'Farrell's parody of that crappy song Mikey had programed his stereo to use to wake him up in the morning. Whatever it was called. Raph cast a glare at the gangster, who was squatting beside him opposite Enzo, gun in hand. Jimmy could not sing, and he was making a bad song worse. Raph considered telling him to shut up, but on reconsideration, didn't want Enzo to kick him again. Enzo probably wouldn't be the only one—Jimmy was nearly as erratic.

Raph glanced over at House, the pasty fat guy he'd heard breathing. Crazy man was wearing a pleather coat lined with faux fleece. In the middle of the summer. And sweating like a pig. And guffawing like an idiot over something the dark, skinny one—Jezimar—had said. What kind of a name was Jezimar? His accent indicated that he wasn't American. Mexican, maybe. His fingers were long, his fingernails painted black. So he was that kinda guy, huh? Either emo or emo-wannabe, probably the latter if his spastic giggles were any indication. Maybe he just liked black nail polish.

Malcolm, whose last name Raph had learned to be Clarke, was sitting a few feet in front of his captive, eyes glittering as he watched the turtle. Raph wasn't sure why Malcolm watched him. He hadn't done anything interesting. He let his eyes trail upwards, to the fire escape he had come down, trying to plot an escape route.

"Enzo, knock 'im over the head," said Malcolm.

"With pleasure," replied Enzo, and Raph felt a sharp pain slam into the back of his head, knocking him forward a little. In rage, he turned around, ready to knock his enemy's feet out from under him. Instead, he felt a shoe connect with his chin. He saw stars.

When his senses cleared, he was flat on his face on the pavement and could hear Malcolm speaking. "...think I can see you lookin' for a way to escape? Not gonna happen, Bucko."

As much as it angered him to think it, Malcolm was probably right. Blood was still oozing from his leg, and he was lying in quite a bit of it. He had to stop the bleeding somehow before he passed out. In fourteen minutes he'd either be dead or rescued, and either he would be free to take care of the bleeding or it wouldn't matter anymore. That had been his thought, at least, until now, when he was starting to feel a little light-headed. He pushed himself back into a sitting position with a grunt and reached down to his knee to untie the strap there.

"Forget it," Malcolm said warningly.

That really ticked Raph off. So far, he'd managed to keep from getting himself shot by losing it—Leo would be proud. But just now, he had stopped caring. "I'm tryin'a' stop the bleeding," he growled. "You want my cooperation? Lemme take care of the fuckin' hole you put in my leg."

"Let him bleed out," called Jezimar from where he sat with House. "Den he'll pass out an' shut up an' be easier to take care of."

"Listen," Raph said darkly, "if this's gonna be the last fifteen damn minutes of my life, I wanna be *conscious!* "

"Think, Jez," said House, leaning in to his friend, "if he passes out, what fun'll he be?"

"I change my mind," Jez said immediately. "Let him patch da hole in his leg." He grinned widely, eyes shining at Raph. Raph immediately decided that Jezimar was his least favorite of the gangsters. He was just enough like Mikey that he was annoying in all the same ways, but Raph had the sense that this guy had a nasty sense of fun to boot, and not in the way Mikey had a nasty sense of fun.

"Whatever you guys want," Malcolm said easily, stretching his arms over his head recklessly. He bent backwards, causing vertebrae to pop, then rolled his meaty shoulders.

Enzo knocked the barrel of his gun against the side of Raph's beak. "Go ahead," he said. "You try anything funny, I put a hole in your *head* ." He sounded like he would take any excuse to do so.

Without a word, Raph untied the strap around his knee. The band wound around the joint several times before coming off. It was leather, so it wasn't ideal, but it was better than nothing. He shoved the hide against the his thigh, hissing with pain as salt from the sweat that had drizzled onto the leather stung the open wound. Pushing the pain aside, he pressed the strap against where the bullet had torn into his flesh. It was a deep wound. He didn't think the bullet had hit bone, but he knew that it hadn't gone out the other side. Therefore, it was still in his leg somewhere. If he made it out of here alive, Leo or Don would dig it out for him. If he didn't, then it wouldn't matter.

A wave of nausea enveloped him, and not just because of the amount of blood he had lost. *If he didn't make it out alive.* Until now, he had only thought about the possibility in a logical sense: he would make it out or he wouldn't. The prospect of death had never bothered him that much. But then, he'd always figured that he would go out in a blaze of glory in a heroic death in the heat of battle. Not as a hostage gunned down by a gang of thugs.

No way he was going that way.

He glanced over to House and Jez again, or more accurately, to what they were guarding. His sais lay between the two gangsters, with House's massive foot planted firmly on top of them. If Raph was going to die, he was going to die fighting.

His muscles tensed. He made ready to spring.

Author's Notes: Enzo and Malcolm's last names (Gordon and Clarke) are an homage to the voice actors who portrayed Bebop and Rocksteady on the original cartoon.

12:48 AM

12:48 AM

Casey raised his hands and backed up a little as the mortician, a skinny, middle-aged bald man with glasses, pointed a scalpel at him. "I knew you were coming," the man claimed, wide-eyed, the hand wielding the scalpel shaking so badly that Casey could see two hands, two scalpels. "Andrea called me. She called the police, too. They're coming for you."

No way a dude with a penknife is gonna keep me from gettin' that kidney. "Sorry about this," Casey growled and swiftly bent his knee, shot his foot out to slam the doctor in the gut. The man tumbled backwards, wind knocked out of him, the scalpel clattering to the floor. Casey moved forward and swept the scalpel up from the floor with a sharp exhalation, his body and mind resisting what he had to do next. Kneeling by the winded doctor, he held the scalpel close to the man's carotid artery. "Where's Cheryl Mattingly's kidneys?" Later on, he would have to think on how weird a question that was.

The doctor didn't reply. He panted heavily, terrified eyes affixed on the fluorescent ceiling lights that reflected on the surface of his glasses.

Casey leaned in and spoke lowly. "Cheryl Mattingly. Her kidneys. Where?"

"Cart," croaked the mortician.

Casey glanced at the man's I.D. card. "Thanks, Rick." No time to waste. His eyes snapped up to scan the room. There was a small cart, stainless steel, beside one of the bed-things with bodies on them. It had three shelves, all of which held ice chests like one would pack a picnic lunch in. One was open and filled with ice. Holding his breath and preparing himself for an unpleasant experience, he

jumped to his feet and jogged to its side. Scanning the papers attached to each of them...heart, lung, liver, KIDNEY! Just to make sure, he continued to scan the paper, and Cheryl Mattingly's name was there. Hands shaking, he seized the box and hoisted it up from the cart. Now he had to get back out. It had been easy so far, but Andrea had definitely called the cops by now. He had to get out before they got there.

"You can't just take that!" shouted Rick, sitting up, eyes still wide with terror.

"Sorry, Rick, I really am," Casey said, meaning every word. The box was fairly heavy, and he tucked it under one arm, the bottom edge digging into his hip. His eyes glimpsed caught the face of the woman lying on the table beside him, and he froze, captured by her features.

It was a grotesque sight, a woman lying dead and open on a table, insides exposed and empty, displaying only gore and leftover organs covered in congealing blood. But her face, her face was striking. Her hair was pale, like milk and gold, yanked into a ponytail. Bringing the hair back from her face enhanced her severe facial features, her high forehead, her razor-sharp cheekbones, her scant, pale eyebrows, her square chin, thin lips, and narrow blue eyes. Cheryl Mattingly. A name he hadn't known, but now, seeing her, he knew whose kidney he was stealing. He knew who was going to receive it.

His stomach burned. He couldn't do this. He couldn't save the life of a man he hated like this, who was so powerful, so... *evil* .

"Whoever you steal that for—their body will just reject it."

Casey shook his head softly, coming back to himself. He couldn't afford to think of who would receive the kidney. He had to think of Raph. "Not my problem, Rick." *I hope so, Rick* . He turned around and jogged toward the door.

"But someone needs that kidney!" called Rick as Casey sprinted out the door.

"Damn right," Casey called back, his gut tying itself into aching knots. He almost faltered. *Raph needs this* , he thought, pulling himself together. But he wasn't just saving Raph now, and it hurt like hellfire. He ignored it and dashed down the hallway. Up the stairs, up the stairs. The door to the stairs banged open, and he climbed, skipping three steps at a time, but it was harder this time, going up, with a box full of ice and organ, and his legs began to slow him down. He quickly checked his watch and immediately felt better—he was making good time. It had only been seven minutes. Seven minutes? Was it possible to accomplish this in such little time? Whatever. He had, and now he had eleven minutes to get back, and things would be harder this time if the cops showed up. He could get out, get the kidney to the Dragons, and then, no, don't think about after, because right now, there is no after. Can't waste thought on after.

Up, up, up, and he was on ground level! He gripped the box with both hands and backed into the door, shoving it open.

"FREEZE!"

He did. Everything did. His heart, his breath, his blood, the air. Everything froze.

"Put the kidney down and come out with your hands where I can see 'em!" The voice was large and dark, booming throughout the room like a messenger of doom. Messenger of doom. What a thought.

But Casey knew something. Casey knew that cops weren't supposed to shoot at people unless someone's life was being threatened. And Casey had only a kidney for a hostage.

He jumped forward, to the next flight of stairs, and began to climb, skipping four steps this time. Up, up, up, up, feet falling to the same tempo as his heartbeat, and he could hear sounds of pursuit, sounds of people scrambling in through the stairwell door, sounds of feet climbing after him, faster than his because they were only moving over one step at a time. He stumbled, caught himself, and continued,

swearing at himself for losing an instant of precious time. Up, up, up, up, and he didn't know where he was going.

Second floor, and he burst through the door and into another corridor, and didn't even think of where he might be going, he just ran. Down the hall, hearing footsteps coming closer to the top of the stairwell, and he picked the closest room and tried the doorknob. Locked. Next door came open just as the stairwell door did, and Casey flew into the room and locked the door behind him.

It was some sort of lounge. Couches, chairs, things he only looked at because he was leaping over them, over crimson carpet to a large, floor-length window looking over a busy city street. It was like nightmares he'd had, of being chased, and always being just on the verge of capture, running for a point of safety. In those nightmares, being caught, making it to safety, and waking up had always happened simultaneously. Maybe this was one of those nightmares.

As he reached the window and stopped, his momentum sent him forward, and he bumped into it hard enough to shoot sparkles of pain through his nose and forehead. It did not break. Holy crap, the fall was insane! He had never thought of a second-story window as being high, but now that he was up here, looking out one, he knew his chances for surviving the fall were slim.

The doorknob rattled. They would have it open soon. Casey frantically searched for a place to hide. No, no time to hide! Ten minutes left, maybe less! He could shatter the window, find a way to climb down. That would mean the cops would be left with no doubt as to which room he was in. Oh man, oh man, what to do, what to do...

In lieu of deciding, Casey held his breath.

The room was so dark. Sweat poured down his body, chilling his flushed skin, making him shiver. He curled his lips over his teeth and bit them. The only sounds besides his stifled, hitched breaths were the muffled thumps against the door and rattlings of the doorknob,

and Mitch's voice, little more than white noise now. After a moment, one of the cops, if there was more than one, spoke.

"Sir? I know you're in there. If you come out and give up the kidney, you'll have a minimal sentence. Don't make me bust in there, or your sentence will be upped for resisting arrest." He sounded so calm. Was he bluffing? Surely he'd seen Casey go in that room, and heard him crashing across it.

No time to call the cop's bluff. He had to get out. He sucked in a deep breath, tightened his grip on the precious insulated box, and rushed the window shoulder-first. Skidding to a halt right before hitting it, he let his momentum carry him forward, crashed into the glass sideways. Explosion of glass. The window shattered, the broken glass spraying the air, falling like many stars. His momentum carried him further, and both arms were holding the kidney, he was unable to swing them and regain his balance. He fell forward toward the light-and-dark street below.

Leonardo had accused him of having no sense of self-preservation, telling him that fear is an ally and must be accepted. But Raphael wasn't fearless. Raphael was afraid of a lot of things. He was afraid of losing his family. He was afraid of failing his family. He was afraid of futility. He was afraid of rejection. He was afraid of humiliation. He was afraid of entrapment and imprisonment. He was afraid of losing his mind to the monster inside him that turned every emotion into a raging inferno, a deafening roar in the ears of his mind. He was afraid of losing the tattered cloak of his dignity, the scraps he gathered around himself as he knelt in the shadows of his more talented brothers. He was afraid of being ashamed of himself. He was afraid of others being ashamed of him. He was afraid of fear, the cancer, the faceless entity pouring oil on his rage.

But he was not afraid of death. Death was barely worth acknowledging, the threat of emptiness and the promise of release from fear. If he let himself fear death, it would eat him alive. If he let

himself be afraid, then he would be just that--afraid. And there was nothing that Raphael feared more.

Not even five thugs with guns and a vendetta.

He sprang forward, biting down against the shattering pain in his wounded leg. Stars danced before his eyes, but he forced himself ahead, toward the precious weapons his captors were guarding. If he had meant to fight to escape and live, he would have tried for one of the guns. But he was too outnumbered, and there was no hope of escaping alive. He was fighting to die.

Shouts arose as he fell forward and slid on his plastron over the pavement. Without even looking, his hands closed over the handles of his weapons. Up on his feet again, and he knocked Jez over with a swift punch and whirled to face House. House snarled at him and reached for him. Raph ducked and swung a low roundhouse kick to knock the man's feet out from under him.

Putting all his weight on his bad leg caused the kick to falter halfway as he crumpled to the ground, pain lancing throughout the limb. He silently swore at himself for his poor thinking. Hands were on him, from behind, seizing his arms, his sais, yanking the weapons from his hands and jerking him upward, to his feet. A gun was pressed against his temple, and Enzo's angry screams pierced his skull.

"I'm gonna kill 'im!" Enzo was holding the gun.

"Forget it, Enzo, you were stupid if you didn't expect 'im ta do somethin' like this!" The speaker was Malcolm, who was holding Raph's right arm.

"I say we let Enzo shoot 'im just so Enzo can shut the fuck up," said Jimmy, who was on Raph's left.

"Enzo can live," rumbled House. "We've gotta think of the boss."

"An' besides," added Jez, "it's more fun to watch him try to beat us. Isn't he cute?" He grinned at Raph, and Raph wanted so desperately to take out a handful of the man's yellow teeth that he jerked against the men holding him. Hands tightened on his arms, and a sudden onset of dizziness convinced him to stop struggling unnecessarily. S*ave your strength. Keep it in a hidden reserve. Then unleash it when the time is right.* The early lesson replayed itself in his mind, Splinter's voice as vivid as it had been the day the words had first been spoken.

"You're outvoted, Enzo," said House. "The turtle lives." He clapped a hand on the zealot's shoulder, surprisingly calming, then sank back to the ground. He was holding Raph's sais, Raph noted, and set them beneath his feet again. Anger churned in the ninja's stomach.

Enzo growled and yanked the gun back down, shoving it defiantly into his belt. "You pansies do whatever the fuck you want," he snarled, "but when that... *thing* does somethin', anything, I don't like, he's mine. I'm gonna kill 'im," he repeated, and stormed back to his seat.

House snorted. "You wanna deal with the boss? The man told us to take out his fuckin' sister. He's cold, man. He'd eat you alive."

"He'd thank me for takin' out one-a *them* ," retorted Enzo, shooting the big man a sharp look. "He hates 'em more than anyone. He'd die happy knowin' it, too." He eased himself onto the asphalt and sat with his legs crossed, glaring at Raph. "He'll tell you," he said to his comrades, eyes narrowing. He pointed his gun at the turtle. "He knows I'm right." Lowering the gun again, his eyes shot to Malcolm, who remained silent.

Jimmy and Malcolm tugged on Raph's arms, and Raph let them lead him away from Jez and House and back to where he had been sitting. He let them sit him back down, although it hurt more than anything they had done to him. *Save your strength. Conserve it. Build it up.* He took a deep breath, calming himself, or at least trying.

They released him and went back to their positions, guns at the ready, more wary, watching him for any sign of restlessness.

Raphael was almost out of restlessness, though. He exhaled and allowed his eyelids to sink. Between the gunshot wound and his battered face, his strength was draining. The pain sapped his vitality, and as the adrenaline from his brief fight wore off he was so freaking *tired* that he almost wanted them to shoot him. Maybe death was a little like sleep. Either way, it was better than waiting, helpless.

He would try again. He couldn't just sit here. What would Leo do? Leo could see any chance, any opening for an attack. He would bide his time, waiting for the right moment. But Leo wouldn't be trying to go out in a blaze of glory. He would have some sort of selfless cause...

Raph's eyes opened as a thought struck him. *Selfish bastard* , he swore at himself. He shouldn't be trying to fight them. He should be trying to escape. If he escaped, Casey wouldn't have to steal the kidney. If he escaped, Hun wouldn't get the transplant. His mind shook off the cobwebs taking hold and began to turn more urgently.

Leo would bide his time. Don was resourceful. What did Raph have? A leather belt and an unloaded gun. Tie the belt to the gun, instant grappling hook. Or grappling thing, anyway. There was a fire escape above his head. It might reach. There were only five problems with the plan: five gun-wielding gangsters. But he couldn't just sit there.

Entrapment. Imprisonment. Futility. All things he feared, all the anthem of the last ten minutes of his life. But when they came, there was no longer a reason to fear them, because their damage was already done. He hated them, but he did not fear them any longer. Death was the same.

But fear, fear was something that hurt long after it came. He was was afraid of fear, and now, he was afraid.

12:52 AM

12:52 AM

Casey swung the box backwards, forcing his momentum backwards and tipping back into the room. He landed hard on his rear, causing a dull pain there, and he winced but did not cry out. *Close call* . He pushed himself to his feet and peered down below, at the ground two stories beneath the window. He had to act quickly. The cops would have heard the glass shattering, and they would know he was trying to escape that way. He had to act quickly.

The cop was pounding on the door, and the force of the blow powered the beat of Casey's heart as it climbed into his throat. "Sir, don't make me bust in there," called the cop.

Deep breath. "I'm sorry," he called over his shoulder. "You'd do the same, bro, believe me." Below his feet, below the window, ten feet above the street, miles above the world, there was a large, glowing sign that said...something. He couldn't read it at this angle. The kidney was in an insulated ice chest. It should be fine. He would have to risk it. If he was caught, Raph would die. Game over.

He had to jump.

"Whatever it is, it's not worth a life in prison, sir." No way that would be his sentence. "Just come out now and I'll put in a good word for you."

Not worth a life in prison . As long as Raph was alive. As long as he'd done all he could. As long as he fought before drowning, it would be worth it.

It would be worth it.

Casey stretched out his arms, holding the ice chest above the ground two stories below like an offering, and let it fall. He spun

around and bounced backwards into open air.

It would be worth it.

He was flying. Weightless. On an amusement park ride with April, it was thrilling. Out on a romp with Raph, it was fun. This was not. This was a complete disconnection from everything that made him alive. He may or may not have learned enough ninja to pull this off. He might not have to worry about prison. He might stop caring about Raph and April because he was busy being dead.

Even as the last thought flashed through his mind, even in midair, he knew it to be false.

Fingers! Plastic! Face, chest, glowing beige light, pain exploding as the first two collided with the last. The edge of the sign dug into his fingers as he caught it, and he thought his arms had been jerked out of their sockets. His fingertips struggled to maintain their hold, but they slipped, and again, he flew.

SLAM!

No air. In his lungs. No air. Didn't matter. He struggled, stars spinning around his head like in some old cartoon with the road runner and the coyote and shoulder jerked to one side, again, and he rolled, and BREATH! Air inflated his lungs and he nearly passed out, vision collapsing into static. Pinpricks rushed over his face, his feet, his fingers, and there was no way he had all his ribs intact.

His vision cleared, and for a moment, he thought he was dead. Gore spattered the concrete. Then he saw the open ice chest, and the ice scattered everywhere like discarded diamonds, and he understood.

The kidney.

Gone.

Raphael.

Gone.

Raph opened his eyes as he sensed someone's presence very, very close to him, too close for comfort. Jez squatted by him, clasping his hands between his knees and squinting at him with a glint in his dark eye. "You know," said the gangster, "where I come from, you could make a lot of money as a freak at parties."

"Shut up, Jez," snarled Enzo, glancing darkly over his shoulder at his colleague. "We know everything's better in Brazil."

Jez ignored him pointedly. "Me an' Jimmy, we have a bet going on." He tilted his head to one side and watched the turtle as though waiting for him to respond to that idea.

Raph was too weak and tired to be bothered with a verbal struggle and decided to humor him. "What's that?" he sneered.

"Jimmy got ten bucks says you have a asshole under dat shell. I don't believe him. What do you say to dat, turtle?" Jez grinned broadly, displaying a set of slightly yellowed teeth glowing against his brown skin.

Raph told him where he could deposit his question.

"Oh ho ho!" laughed Jez, leaning in. "If you won't tell me, I'll just have to find out, yeh?" His grin widened, and Raph turned his face away from the smell of his pungent breath.

"Whatever hand you touch me with, you'll lose," Raph hissed, muscles tensing. His blood was beginning to run cold, even as his chest began to burn.

"Really?" Jez drew the question out with sickening sweetness, like maple sap oozing down the side of a tree. He turned his head back to his fellows. "Eh, House! Jimmy! Come here an' hold him down!"

Raph shot to his feet, but his arms were seized by four hands and yanked downward, dragging him to the pavement. He was shoved flat on his face. He jerked. A foot slammed down on his carapace and planted itself there, pinning him. The pavement scraped against his skin. A groping hand slipped underneath his shell, between his legs, a hand where it should not have been, and he heard laughter.

"You were right, Jimmy! It does have a asshole!" Jez's finger tapped the area as he laughed. The edges of Raph's vision began to glow a vivid red. Heat welled up in his face. Blood pounded in his ears. His arms strained against those holding him, their fingers digging into his flesh.

He was afraid of humiliation.

"You gonna stick your finger in it?" snorted Jimmy, the village idiot.

"No, man, I ain't no turtle-lover. 'Ey House, gimme your flashlight. We can see how dat fits in here."

Fear, the cancer, the faceless entity pouring oil on his rage.

Author's Notes: My many Brazilian friends will be the first to tell you that I have nothing against Brazil or its people. In fact, it sounds like a very cool place to me, and its people--the ones I've met, anyway--are loads of fun. But there will always be bad apples.

12:54 AM

12:54 AM

An instant later, Casey Jones was running.

Street lights. Headlights. Lights brighter than the sign, brighter than the sun, brighter than heaven and hotter than hellfire. Across the street. Horns. Someone slammed on breaks, someone else rear-ended the person who slammed on breaks. And Casey was across the street.

He tumbled into a dark alley behind a building and gasped for air.

Kidney. Gone.

Raph. Gone.

"As our program draws to a close tonight...yeah, I know," rambled Mitch as someone in the audience cried out in dismay.

Gone.

The next thing Raph knew coming to his senses was being hit hard across the face by someone's fist. His vision cleared. Malcolm was striking him repeatedly, rage burning hot on his face. He was on his back. Jim and House had him pinned to the ground on either side, Enzo was standing at his shoulder with a gun, and Jez was lying far away, breathing, but otherwise motionless.

"You crazy?" screamed Malcolm.

Confusion. Panic. *What the hell happened?* He remembered Jez, his hand where it should not have been, the humiliation, the Brazilian gangster's request for a flashlight to—no, not that. That couldn't have happened. Dismay filled him. He hadn't. He couldn't have...

He didn't , Raph realized as he suddenly understood what had happened.

He had flown into a rage and attacked Jez. It wasn't an unheard-of occurrence, sometimes happening when he grew too angry to stand it—his vision would go red, then black, and he would have no idea what he was doing. It was one of the many things Raphael had always feared. This time, it had been his salvation.

"This's it, Malcolm," snarled Enzo as Malcolm ceased his battering. "The little bastard's gonna die." Raphael heard a snick as a gun was cocked. He jerked instinctively against the men holding him.

"Point it up your ass, Enzo," sneered Malcolm.

"YOU SAW WHAT IT DID!" Enzo screamed at Malcolm. "I'M GONNA KILL 'IM!"

So it was between getting raped with a flashlight and being shot by a maniac. Choices, choices.

"Jones comes back an' finds 'im dead, we don't get the kidney," bellowed Malcolm, giving Enzo a glare full of poisoned daggers. "An' then, you got me an' the boss to deal with. You wanna kill 'im? Fine. But wait till we get the kidney. Then you can go t'town, for all I care. Stick the damn flashlight up 'is ass. Blow 'is brains out, I don't care."

"I don't hafta wait on you, you ain't in charge here. The bastard's gonna die."

"You do, I bust your gut." Malcolm pulled a baseball bat from his belt, tapping it against the pavement threateningly.

Enzo snorted. "Yeh, that's real scary, Malcolm. Tell ya what. I take this thing out, then I use your little stick for a toothpick." He aimed his pistol at Raphael's head and fired..

Raph twisted suddenly, jerking away from the men holding him as the gun went off. He rolled a yard and leaped to his feet. Pain shot through his wounded leg all the way up to his head, and he swayed. Pinpricks of light clouded his vision. Voices threaded their way into his conscious mind.

"...uck you...kin' turtle's dead!"

"Enzo, stop!"

POW!

Everything went black.

No.

They weren't going to take Raph. Casey would get him back, without that stupid kidney, like he should have done in the beginning. No way those freaks were going to push him around anymore. Not them, not Hun, not that little tyrant Mitch, still rambling in his ears, reminding him of how little time he had.

Casey ripped off the scrubs and yanked the mask off his face. No way he was running around the streets wearing the outfit that said "Hi, I broke into the hospital right over there and stole a kidney." He dumped the scrubs in the shadow of a garbage can and ripped the elastic from the mask. The elastic, when tied together at the ends, made a serviceable ponytail holder, and Casey put it to use, finger-combing his hair into a ponytail and twisting the band around it. Leaning against the wall by the trash can was an old broom, the kind with real straw and a wooden handle, and Casey grabbed it. He swiftly broke the handle above the straw over his knee and cast the straw aside. It wasn't what he was used to, but it was better than nothing. He glanced at his watch, and his stomach flipped. He had four minutes.

Showtime.

Casey Jones broke into a run.

Author's Notes: Yes, it's a very short chapter, but it had everything in it that it needed to. The next will have quite a bit happening. Thank you for the reviews!

12:56 AM

12:56 AM

He would have to overshoot they alley and loop back around to avoid the cops. That should be okay, he had four minutes, and the alley was less than a block away now. Sprint like a thread of wind in a storm. Breathe in, breathe out. No time to waste. Footfalls thudded in his ears, no louder than his heartbeat. Run, run, and soon it will be over. Either you will win, or you will not. No time to waste.

The next crosswalk was half a block from the alley, two blocks from the hospital. He hit the "walk" button and waited.

Waited.

Waited.

The counter on the walk sign read 58, 57, 56...

Think, Jones.

Think.

What to do when you get there?

He had nothing. A stick. And Mitch, of course.

"As we close tonight's program, I want to leave you with a little song..."

Mitch?

He had Mitch. He had the radio. And a stick.

47, 46, 45, 44...

What to do with Mitch and a stick?

Think, Jones.

Thinking, thinking...

33, 32, 31, 30...

Stupid light.

Don't think about the light. No time. What to do?

A stick and Mitch.

The radio.

The volume control.

The earbuds, thrown at a distance...then the stick.

It was the best he had.

21, 20, 19...

Hurry up, freakin' walk sign!

18, 17, 16, 15...

14, 13, 12, 11, 10...

9...

7...

6...

5...

4...

3...

Walk sign!

Casey walked. He did not run. He held the stick low, tried to look perfectly calm, inconspicuous, normal. He was not being searched for by police. He was not crossing the street to kill five gangsters who were holding his friend hostage. He was not scared to death that he might fail. Normal. Inconspicuous. Calm. Breathe in, breathe out. One foot at a time, step by step across the street while cars were stopped, their drivers no doubt glaring at him for causing their light to turn red. He ignored them. He did not run.

He was across the street, and his pace picked up, heading straight down the sidewalk to overshoot the alley again, approach from the opposite end. He glanced at his watch, which displayed the time 12:58. Holy crap. He broke into a sprint. No time to waste. He turned a corner, into an alley running perpendicular to the one he was headed for, and forced himself to slow down. They would hear him coming. They would seek him, and see him, standing there with a stick and no kidney. They would kill Raph. Half-jogging, landing on the sides of his feet like the turtles had shown him when teaching him how to walk quietly, he breathed deeply and slowly, quietly, noiselessly. He was not there. No one would know.

He heard voices and stopped by the alley, his goal. He heard voices, and seized the tiny radio they had given him, changing the frequency. Static, music, static, music, static, static, music...he didn't want music. He switched the radio to AM. Static, static, talk show. Perfect. He ripped the earbuds from his ears and could hear the voices from the alley.

"...ad to do something, now he's not bothering anyone."

"Jez's fine, just got the shit knocked outta him."

"You should've let me kill him."

"Siddown, Enzo. Hold out for another two minutes, and I'll let you do anything you want to him."

So Raph was still alive.

Scarcely daring to breathe, Casey turned the volume up on the radio to its maximum setting. He set the radio down at his feet and tossed the earbuds into the alley, as far as they would go. Then he stepped behind the wall and waited, holding his breath. Voices came from the earbuds, loud enough over Malcolm's radio that he was sure the gangsters could hear it. Why weren't they responding? Why weren't they curious?

"You hear somethin'?"

"I was thinkin' the same thing. House—check it out."

Which one was House?

A second later, the enormous gangster lumbered into view, eyes darting about.

Oh, that's why they called him House.

Deep breath.

No time to waste. Casey lashed out with his stick, striking the man in the temple. The gangster was still crumpling, senseless, when Casey dropped the stick, snatched the gun from House's holster, and swung it upward and to the side, firing before any of the other gangsters could react.

POW! The pale one dropped.

POW! That was Enzo, who had been scrambling to his feet and aiming his gun at Raph. Not anymore.

POW! The leader went down, shock plastered on his dark face when the man he had blackmailed shot him in the chest.

Dead silence.

Was it really that easy?

The darkish one, the foreigner Jezimar, was sitting up against a wall, eyes flickering open. And across from him...

"Raph." Casey dashed to where his unconscious friend was lying prostrate on the ground and carefully flipped him over, scanning him quickly for injuries. He couldn't see much in the darkness, but there was blood smeared everywhere, and he had a split in his lip, or whatever you called it on turtles. He gently slapped the ninja on either side of his face, trying to wake him. It was no use. Lowering the turtle to the ground, he gripped his gun and spun on Jezimar.

Jezimar was huddled against the wall and staring in shock at the bodies lying around him. Casey was upon him in two long steps and seized him by the front of his shirt, yanking him upward until they were face to face. Jezimar trembled.

"You go back to Hun," Casey said darkly, "and you tell him, 'Nobody fucks with Casey Jones.' Got that?"

"Yeah," whispered Jez, his face spreading into a grin. Casey heard the sound of a gun being cocked. He felt cold metal slam into his gut. "Yeah, I gotcha."

12:59 AM

12:59 AM

Casey fell to one side just before Jez's gun went off. The bullet exploded against the opposite wall. He rushed the gangster, slamming into his side and knocking him over. They hit the ground together, and Casey immediately felt a fist connect with his jaw. He growled and struck out. Two more times did a fist slam into his jaw, and he saw stars. That snick again, of a gun being cocked. He grabbed Jezimar's wrist, trying to shake the gun from his grip. Jezimar surprised him by flipping over, pinning Casey beneath him and slamming his hand into the pavement. Casey's gun left his grip and skittered across the asphalt. Gritting his teeth, Casey tightened his left hand on Jez's wrist as Jez strained to aim his gun at Casey. The gangster's wrist flicked, and the gun flew into his left hand. Jez took aim.

Casey struck out with his left hand and took hold of Jez's left wrist, shoving it upward. He released Jez's right wrist and slammed his fist into his gut. Jez doubled over, the wind knocked out of him, but did not relinquish his hold on his gun. Casey charged forward, toppling the Brazilian and flattening him on the pavement. His right hand struggled for Jez's gun. His left hand hit the gangster repeatedly across the face.

Suddenly, Jez's right hand seized Casey's left and he sank his teeth into the vigilante's index finger, hard. Casey howled in pain and instinctively jerked his hand away. Jez's teeth tore through it as it freed itself. The back of his head hit pavement, and he realized that Jez had knocked him flat on his back. His right hand still clutched Jez's wrist, and both their arms shook from strain. Casey struggled to keep the gun pointed away from him while Jez struggled to point the gun at Casey. The Brazilian was strong, much stronger than he looked, and it had been a long night for Casey. The end of the gun wobbled left, right, left, right, Casey watched it as it inched its way

toward him, then jerked away, then toward him a little more, slowly, slowly as Casey's strength ebbed, moving towards him, inches away from his head now, and Casey's heartbeat was like timpani in his ears, his dry mouth open and gasping for air, for strength to keep himself alive.

Strength to keep himself alive.

Strength to keep Raph alive.

Strength to keep a family whole.

Strength to protect a family he did not yet have.

Strength for the love he wanted to keep forever.

He released a mighty growl, his blood throbbing in his temples, sweat pouring down over his flushed skin, but he could not move Jez's arm another inch. Slowly, slowly, and Casey stared down the barrel of the gun.

Jez grinned.

There was the crack of a gunshot.

Silence.

Sirens blared in the background.

Jez slumped, then collapsed on top of Casey.

It was one o'clock.

It had taken him eighteen minutes to do what he should have done in the first minute.

Bewildered, Casey sat up, shoving his attacker as far away as possible, eyes groping for the source of the gunshot.

Raphael was on his knees, eyes blank as white noise, holding the gun Casey had lost. He wobbled, and the gun slipped from his fingers. Casey shot forward and caught him as he fell forward, eyes sliding shut, his consciousness sliding into darkness.

Cell, cell, cell... Casey frantically searched Raph, trying to remember where he kept his cell. Under his arm, in his shell, deep enough that it didn't feel like a rock in his armpit. Casey's hand fished it out, shaking as it frantically dialed the number two—speed dial for someone, he didn't know who, but it was someone on Raph's speed dial, therefore, someone who could help.

Ring, ring, "Hello?"

"Splinter!" gasped Casey. "You guys gotta get down here, Raph's hurt bad, I dunno what they did to him, but he's shot in the leg--"

"Casey," Splinter said calmly, "slow down. I cannot understand you."

Deep breath. "It's Raph," he said, and quickly gave their location. "What the fuck, Don can track us with the cell. We need help, we needa get Raph back to the lair ASAP. Right now, I gotta run, the cops are comin'. Just get here--"

"I understand, Casey. We will be there in just a moment. Do not leave Raphael alone."

"I won't, I won't, I'm carryin' 'im." Casey pinched the phone between shoulder and ear and carefully eased Raph over his shoulder like a sack—not very comfortable for either of them, but Raph couldn't bend well in the middle due to his shell, so at least he could breathe. "I gotta go, you guys catch up." He could see the flashing of blue and red lights as he began to run, adrenaline replacing the strength he had lost.

"We are on our way."

"Get in," Leonardo said urgently, holding the van door open for Casey. Casey all but collapsed into the van, allowing Leonardo and Donatello to take Raph from him. He dragged himself all the way in and slumped against the wall, panting heavily. Cool air rushed into his aching lungs, chilling his heated insides. The perspiration dripping down his skin cooled him slowly.

"Step on it, Mike," called Leo as he and Don carefully lay Raph down. The van jerked forward, and Casey's hand slapped down on the floor to keep himself from toppling. Leo seized upon Raph's leg, inspecting it closely as Don tried to wake his unresponsive brother.

"They got him good," Leo said softly. "The bullet's lodged in his leg, and the blood's congealed all around it. He's still bleeding a little. We're gonna have to get him back pretty quick. We can't just stick the damn tweezers in his leg while the van's moving."

"His face is beaten to a pulp," Don murmured, anger sparking in his voice. "He's probably got a concussion."

"Is he waking?" The voice was Splinter's. Casey hadn't noticed him coming in from the front.

"I'm getting eye movement. Ah...here he comes."

Raph's eyes cracked open, then his heavy eyelids sank closed again. They opened a little wider, as if he was having genuine trouble waking up. A small sound emerged from his lips, and his eyes slid closed again.

Splinter leaned over him, gently touching the side of Raph's face. "We are here, my son," he said softly. "You are safe."

Raph's eyes opened halfway. "Wh's Casey?" he croaked, eye ridges furrowing.

"I'm right here, man," Casey said quickly, stumbling over to Raph's side. He dropped to his knees. "I'm okay," he added.

"Head hurts."

"Yeah, you were unconscious when I found you."

"Someone...hit me. Think i'was House."

"You're okay now."

"Wh's...didja..." Raph's eyes fluttered closed.

"Hey," Casey said sharply, lightly slapping the side of Raph's face. Raph's eyes opened again. "Stay with me."

"How much do you remember?" murmured Splinter, stroking Raph's head gently.

Raph's eyes fixed on his master. "I...I knocked Jez out...Enzo jus' about killed me, then...someone knocked me over the head. I think i'was House," he repeated, eyelids drooping.

Don pinched his arm, forcing him awake again. Casey was worried. "You don't remember after that?" he asked, eyebrows knitting.

"Wha...how'd I get here?"

"He's got a concussion," Leo said softly as he listened to the conversation.

"No kidding," said Don. He glanced at Casey. "Keep him awake." He moved to help Leo stop the bleeding of Raph's leg.

Splinter, in the meantime, had lifted Raph's head into his lap, trying to make him more comfortable. "Casey saved you and called us for help," he explained patiently to his son. His eyes flickered up to Casey and gave him a grateful nod. Casey nodded back.

"'S he okay?" mumbled Raph.

"I'm fine, man," Casey assured him. "I'm just fine. They hurt you, man?"

Raph rolled his eyes toward his friend. "They shot me in th' leg, Case," he said with a hint of poison evident in his voice.

Casey smiled a little. "I mean, otherwise."

Raph hesitated, as though thinking. "Busted up my face a bit."

"Eh, it'll only make ya look prettier." Casey grinned.

"You got th' kidney?"

This received sharp glances from the surrounding members of Raph's family. Casey shook his head. "Nah, I came back an' busted 'em all. You took out that skinny one yourself. The one with the accent."

Raph looked thoughtful. "Cheech Marin," he breathed after a moment.

"Wha?"

"That's who he made me think of. Evil Br'zilian Cheech Marin." Raph's eyelids slid shut.

"Hey!" Casey barked, pinching Raph hard on the arm. No response. "Hey Raph!" he shouted.

"Raphael!" Splinter said sharply, taking his son's face in both hands.

"Raph!"

Raph...

After the Clock

2:34 AM

It had taken him eighteen minutes to do what he should have done in the first minute.

Casey stepped out of the bathroom in the turtles' lair, having just showered away the muck, grime, and blood of the night. Splinter had lent him one of his clean robes while his clothes were washed. The robe was far too small, barely fitting over his muscled arms, and far too short all around, but it was better than going back to his old ruined garments. He hissed as the cold air hit him. Michelangelo and Donatello glanced over at him from the couch, where they were watching a news special.

"Hey Casey," called Mike, "you wanna see this."

With a sigh, Casey ambled over to stand behind the couch. After a moment, his eyes widened, then his brow pulled down, furrowing over his eyes. "Those sons of bitches," he muttered, heat flaring up in his gut.

The Purple Dragons bad broken into the hospital and stolen Cheryl Mattingly's *other* kidney.

"How the hell did they move so soon?" Mike wondered.

"House," hissed Casey as though it were a curse. "That sonuvabitch, I left 'im alive. He musta gone back and told the others."

Leonardo came out of Raphael's room with a sigh, stretching his arms behind him and looking exhausted. Casey and the other two turtles glanced up, the television forgotten. "He's with Master Splinter," Leo informed them, leaning against the railing of the walkway above. "He'll be fine. The concussion's better, and the bleeding's stopped." He looked at Casey. "Have you called April?"

Casey nodded. "Think I'm gonna hang around here for awhile, till they stop lookin' for me."

"I don't think they're worried about you," Don pointed out. "They've already got someone else stealing the same woman's kidney. I'll bet the heat's off you."

Leo's eye ridges lowered. "What?"

"The Dragons busted into St. Claire's."

"Shhhhit," hissed Leo, eyes glittering dangerously.

"There's nothing you could have done about it, Leo," Mike said softly. "Hun wants something, he gets it."

"Casey?"

Casey's heart leaped. He whirled to the door, where a familiar voice had spoken. April deposited her purse by the door. "What happened?" she asked, looking concerned. She was wearing a button-up t-shirt, unbuttoned, over a tank top and pajama pants like she had jumped out of bed and thrown it on in a hurry. Dark green flip-flops were on her feet, and her vibrant hair was thrown up into a messy bun. She was wearing no make-up, so her pure white skin glowed in its true form.

Her hair and skin like strawberries and cream, she had never looked more beautiful.

"Oh baby," Casey murmured, then ran for her, scooping her up in his arms and holding her so tightly that nothing could tear her away. She flung her arms around his neck, and he could smell her hair, that smell that drove him crazy. He kissed the top of her head firmly, and the scent filled his nostrils, and every single muscle in his body went slack. "Oh baby, it's so good to see you." He pulled away enough to cover her Nicole Kidman lips, her April O'Neil lips, in a warm kiss. His

arms encircled her waist and pulled her close as she responded to his kiss, making a small sound into his mouth.

"Jeez, get a room," scoffed Mike. Casey would deck him for that later, but for now, he didn't care. He was kissing April, and smelling her hair, and everything was all right again. The kiss broke on its own, and they embraced each other again, and she ran her fingers through his hair, murmuring softly.

"I'm here," she whispered. "It's okay."

"I love you," he murmured. "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. You got that?"

"I know, Casey, I love you, too."

"Don't ever forget it." He kissed her again, tasting her sweet mouth gently and brushing his fingertips over the fragile skin of her delicate ears, twirling a stray lock of fragrant hair between his fingers. Strawberries and cream. "You're beautiful, baby," he murmured when the kiss broke. "My beautiful, gentle, wonderful, strong, *perfect* April." He wrapped her in his arms tightly and gently rubbed his hands up and down her back. "Love you so much."

"I know, I love you, too." She kissed him lightly once more, then turned her dark-laced eyes to his, eyes green as the shades of a forest. "What happened?"

"What happened, my son?"

Splinter's question struck Raphael as a little invasive, although he knew it wasn't meant that way. Splinter was never invasive, but he was very protective. Raph and his brothers told him what he asked them to tell, not because of any possible consequences of not telling, but out of respect for their father and master. Also, because Splinter had a right to know, in his own way, because someone who sat by your bed and held your hand and stroked the back of it with his

thumb and watched over you and prayed against bad dreams was someone who had earned the right to know everything about you.

Raph was still struggling to stay awake, fighting the weight of his own eyelids. As Splinter coaxed him, he sipped herbal tea with honey, trying to restore blood volume. "Casey didn't tell you?" he asked, handing the cup back to Splinter.

"He told me his side," murmured Splinter, setting the tea on Raph's nightstand. "Only you can tell your side."

Raph didn't want to tell his side. Now that he wasn't distracted with trying to stay alive, the sheer horror of what had happened to him had finally struck him, and speaking it aloud only made it more real. His mouth opened, his heart pounded, and his mouth shut. He didn't want to say what he had gone through, what had penetrated his mind to its recesses, what had weakened him to the point of futility. But Splinter was there, very real, very worried, and very much in his rights to know.

"Sensei, I was..." He couldn't breathe. A dizzying panic locked his joints, and he was frozen.

"Yes, my son?" Splinter watched him with compassion in his eyes.

With barely any breath to speak, Raph tightened his jaw, visions of Enzo's rage and Jezimar's laughter dancing in front of his eyes.

A hand where it was not supposed to be.

'Ey House, gimme your flashlight.

Vocal cords worked, mouth worked, but there was no breath behind it, so no sound came out.

YOU SAW WHAT IT DID! I'M GONNA KILL 'IM!

"I was..."

Malcolm's calm eyes. *You'll watch 'im die.*

He was afraid of humiliation.

"I was so scared," he croaked, and he sounded like he was a small child again, lost and bewildered and unsure what had happened to him. Unable to look his master in the eye, he turned his head away, tears forcing their way out of his resisting eyes.

So scared .

Warmth, and a soft downy touch, resting upon his face, turning it upwards and wiping away a tear that had escaped. He raised his eyes, and Splinter caught them, holding his son's chin in a firm, gentle grip. "My son," whispered the rat, "it is all right to be afraid. *But* ," he added with a shadow of a smile, "it is also all right to know when there is no need to be afraid."

Tears spilled from Raph's eyes, but they didn't matter when he was pulled into his father's strong embrace.

7:04 PM, two days later

Casey flopped on the couch by Raph, who was watching an episode of *Mythbusters* that had just started. "This the one where they rocket the dummy kid around a swing set?"

"Nah," muttered Raph, "they're seein' if you can rocket yourself into space with Medieval Chinese rockets."

"Seen it already?"

"About a thousand times."

"Wanna go to a movie?"

Raph rolled his eyes. "Think I'm allowed?"

"Aw, c'mon," encouraged Casey. "I'm dyin', here, and I know you're at least as stir-crazy as I am."

"The difference is, I got shot in the leg less'n forty-eight hours ago."

"That's true. But I did jump from a second-story window less'n forty-eight hours ago."

"I got a concussion, I gotcha beat."

"Yeah, but I got a face-full a' Jezimar's breath. That's gotta count for somethin'."

"Believe me, I got way more points off him'n you did." Raph didn't look at his friend. He had told Casey, and only Casey, about Jez's assault, and Casey suspected he regretted it already.

Casey was suddenly worried. "That..." He hesitated. "That's really botherin' ya, huh?"

A pause. "Just...gimme some time, I'll be okay." Raph tossed the remote control from hand to hand idly, still not looking at Casey. This was a habit Casey had noted long ago—when Raph was telling you things he didn't talk about with just anyone, he didn't meet your eye. It was as though he expected to find judgment there, and couldn't look.

With a small nod, Casey gave in. Raph would talk about it when he needed to. "That's cool," he said softly, sinking back against the back of the couch. "Looks like they're settin' up ta give Buster one helluva ride," he said, motioning toward the television.

A wry grin spread over Raph's face. "Yeah, he takes some real punishment in this one."

"Raph?"

"What?"

"Thanks for savin' my life."

"Yeah. Thanks for savin' mine."

"Any time."

"You, too."

Author's Notes: Hwow. I actually finished a multi-chapter story. And quickly, too. Granted, this is pretty short, but still...hwow. I know chapter eight ended with a cliche, but I figured, as much cliche-dodging as I've been attempting, I'm allowed one big, neon-lights-flashing arrows-pointing-to-it "HEY! I'M A CLICHE!" cliche. So that's that: my first attempt at suspense. I enjoyed writing it, and hope you enjoyed reading it. Thank you for reading, and remember to review!